



Show trials

Laughs, tears, jokes, moans it's Davison's night court

DAVISON

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Sunday, March 18, 2007

By James L. Smith

jmsmith@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6365

Davison - Forget the NCAA basketball tournament. For some, the hottest spectator event in town is night court.

The occasional night court sessions, aimed at clearing some of the 20,000 warrants held by the county, has become a must-see event for residents.

A local restaurant even featured a "Night Court Special." The "Last Meal Deal" included ribs, jalapeno poppers, mozzarella sticks, breaded mushrooms, French fries and a small ice cream sundae for \$9.99.

For most of the six hours starting at 8 p.m. Thursday, Davison District Judge John L. Conover kept a standing-room-only audience rapt with his combination civics lesson, comedy routine, sports updates and justice dispensing.

Arrestees included a singer, a dog trainer, a self-described sandwich artist. With only one short break about 12:30 a.m. Friday, Conover delivered his brand of friendly hometown justice to a constant stream of prisoners brought in by officers from around the county.

The crowd, some of them high school and college students, began drifting home about midnight, but not before they witnessed the tragedy and comedy of court.

Sean Gale, 17, a Kearsley High School junior interested in law enforcement as a career, assisted as a volunteer "gofer," running paperwork between the officers and court employees.

"I'm just checking it out, keeping my options open," Gale said.

Gale's sister, Holly Gale of Genesee Township, who works for local attorney Jay Clothier, also was observing.

There were plenty of traffic scofflaws, mainly those driving on suspended licenses who had failed to go to court or pay fines. But there were a few felons who made the involuntary trek to see Conover.

A couple living at a Burton motel were brought in, she for three felony counts of fraud and he on a warrant for a suspended driver's license.

Unable to come up with bail, the pair ended the night handcuffed and shackled, along with 11 others, for the 2 a.m. trip to jail.

Conover took questions from court watchers and carefully explained charges, procedures and his decisions as the night went along.

QUICK TAKE

For the record
About Thursday's session before Davison District Judge John L. Conover:

- Arresting departments: Burton, Grand Blanc Township, Davison, Davison Township, Otisville, Richfield Township, Genesee County Sheriff's Department, Genesee Township, state police and Lapeer.
- Arrests: 42
- Warrants served: 71
- Bonds posted: \$387,528, which includes cash and bonds
- Court employees involved: six clerical, judge's secretary, magistrate, director of court operations, one judge.

But he - and a few of those in custody - were quick to lighten the mood as well.

A short time into the proceedings, Conover gleefully announced that Duke University had lost its first round NCAA tournament game.

"Virginia Commonwealth beat Duke 79 to 77," Conover said. "I really dislike Duke."

A woman arrested on warrants for driving on a suspended license did her own stand-up act, causing Conover to briefly hide his head in his hands after she said she was employed driving cars.

"You're driving for a living, but you don't have a license," Conover said.

The woman also told Conover she missed her court date because she only checks the mail at the end of her driveway every two weeks.

Later when she was released pending a future court date, she asked Conover to pretend to set a high bond.

"Then you can tell my ex-husband to come and pay it," she said.

Still, there was serious business, as was the case for one 23-year-old man. With his mother looking on, he was sentenced to jail for his fourth alcohol-related offense.

"I'm giving you 93 days in the county jail," Conover said. "This will give you time to dig yourself out and get your head on straight."

Outside the courtroom, the man's mother appreciated Conover's words.

"I hope this is a good thing for (my son)," she said. "He's a good, fair judge. This is something my son should have taken care of for a long time."

One man arrested on a Genesee Township loitering warrant was likely grateful that spectators were on hand.

The man, released after settling his case with Conover, needed a ride back home. Officers were too busy, but spectator Terry Blundell of Lapeer drove him back to his house.

"He didn't have a ride - when he called his sister it went to voice mail," said Blundell, a former Oakland County juvenile court worker. "He was an upfront guy and was very appreciative."

With cooperation from the Genesee County Sheriff's Department, Dena Altheide, director of court operations, said night court sessions go a long way in clearing the county's warrant backlog.

"When we release the information about night court ahead of time, we see an influx of people coming in before," Altheide said. "When we release the information after the night court, we see an influx afterwards."

Conover said he would like to do back-to-back night courts so people learn it's not just a one-night event.
